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SciVerse ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 46 (2012) 4746 – 4750

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCES 2012

The impact of a counselling program for abused children

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Abstract

Starting from our previous research on abused children, we have found that in Emergency Reception Centres specialists are focused more on children evaluation (made by centres' psychologist) than on their counselling needs. In this context, our paper aims to analyse the impact of an individualised and group counselling program developed with abused children integrated in an Emergency Reception Centre. Our findings have emphasised important changes regarding personal, social and prospective self of counselled children. For example we found that self esteem has increased from 20% to 64% of counselled children, and prospective self have increased from 30% to 85%. The implementation of the individual and the group counselling program have developed self image of abused children and their chances to scholar and social integration.

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Keywords: Abuse, self esteem, counselling program

1. Introduction

The fact that everyday abused children are brought into Emergency Reception and Day Care Centres represents an alarming signal about the increasing phenomenon of violence in Romania and, more, concerning the intervention ways used by these institutions or by professionals from The Direction for Social Assistance and Child Protection from every county.

The main attributions of Emergency Reception and Day Care Centres for abused children are connected both to emergency intervention in order to separate the child from his abusive family and take adequate protection measures (placement centre, placement to maternal assistant, adoption if the parents are losing their rights as parents etc.), and to support the family and the child by counselling in order to reintegrate the child into his family (if it is the best interest of the child and the case will be monitored by mobile intervention team from The Direction for Social Assistance and Child Protection).

After a research that we have developed on 21 abused children, with ages between 13 and 18 years, from an Emergency Reception and Day Care Centre from Prahova County, we have found the emphasised need for a counselling program for abused children. Although counselling purpose was specified to legislative and procedural level in centre's documents, research findings indicate that in the centre there is no coherent and systematic program for individual and group counselling. This situation is possible because the only specialist from the centre is a psychologist, and his responsibilities are mostly focused on psychological evaluation of the children (initial and periodical); and the mobile intervention team of The Direction for Social Assistance and Child Protection is responsible for a large number of children from many centres.

Considering the *Self Esteem Scale* results, our research findings indicate that 81% of investigated children have a *low self esteem* and 59% have a *low emotional self control* (mostly been affected physical self and prospective self). This situation demonstrate that is imperative that these children to be permanently counselled.

Also, the analyse of *The Observation Grid – dominant behaviour type* indicate that 45% of investigated children demonstrate asocial behaviours, 76% aggressive behaviours, 43% radical behaviours, 52% demission behaviours, and even suicidal tentative (especially cutting their hands), fact that prevent communication with abused children and their scholar and social integration.

Our investigation concerning cognitive processing of information (*Information Processing questionnaire*) indicated that many investigated children (79%) have preponderant negative thoughts about self, the others, their future or about world in generally.

Our research have developed starting from the premise that an individualised and group counselling program for abused children integrated in an Emergency Reception Centre will considerable improve self-esteem, emotional self control, solving problems and communication abilities, and also their scholar and social integration.

2. Research Methodology

Purpose of Study: Our paper aims to analyse the impact of an individualised and group counselling program developed with abused children integrated in an Emergency Reception Centre.

Participants, procedure and methods

Present study has involved 21 abused children placed to the Emergency Reception Centre and Day Care from Prahova County. Children aged between 13 and 18 years old, 12 girls (13 – 17 years old) and 9 boys (14-18 years old).

Study design has followed 3three stages:

I. Implementing an individual counselling program for the investigated subjects. The purpose for the individual counselling program was to stimulate the introspection process in order to a better and more realistic self knowledge, self acceptance, self esteem increasing, solving personal problems in order to an optimal adaptation to his own person and to the situation.

Theoretical fundaments that helped us developing the counselling program structure were key components of gestalt (F. Perls, 1973) and nondirective therapies (C. Rogers, 1951). From gestalt therapy principles we have focused in counselling process on: self-disclosure and self-responsibility principle, “what and how” and “here and now” principle, “what you prefer or what you want” principle (and not “should or have to” principle) in order to help abused child to become aware of his internal obstacles (shame, anxiety, anger etc.) and about the difference between “I am not able to” and “I do not want to”.

Important for the abused children counselling process were to offer them security and worm feeling (“a crucial factor for a constructive change” – I. Mitrofan, 1999, p. 91), emphatic understanding, tolerance, respect and to build a confidence relationship between the counsellor and the child.

Individual counselling program’s *objectives* have been determined by our previous research which indicated that all investigated subjects developed cognitive, affective and behavioural disorders and they have a low level of self esteem:

- O1. Development of a positive self image;
- O2. Cognitive restructuring;
- O3. Achieving problem-solving skills.

And the *issues* that individual counselling has focused on were:

- Clarifying child feelings;
- Identifying the factors that determined a low self esteem;
- Detachment from negative experiences;
- Understanding and externalising their own feelings;
- Identifying interior discourse, interior critic;
- Modifying cognitive schema through relativization of automatic negative thoughts;
- Identifying self development abilities.

Methods and techniques used through individual counselling process were: observation, active listening, reflection, rephrasing, paraphrasing; relaxation techniques (autogenic training by Schultz, progressive relaxation

training of Jacobson); identifying strengths and weaknesses technique; empty chair as dialog support technique; the technique of the wall which allows exploration and finding solutions to overwhelm the obstacle; the technique of storyboarding of incommode, consciously rejected to communicate ideas.

II. Developing group counselling sessions in order to develop interaction and social integration abilities and straightening skills obtained through individual counselling.

The objectives of group counselling have developed the following issues:

- O1. Developing abilities for management and solving problems;
- O2. Developing assertive communication abilities;
- O3. Creating a positive attitude toward world and people;
- O4. Developing responsibility toward their actions and decisions.

The content for the counselling sessions was:

- Aggressive – assertive – passive communication;
- Relationships with family, friends and colleagues;
- Children rights;
- Creating goals in solving-problem.

And *the methods used were*: observation, active listening, assertive and affirmation techniques, reflecting, rephrasing, roles playing, dramatization.

III. Analyse the impact of an individualised counselling program and group activities developed with abused children with research tools from the first stage of the investigation: Self Esteem Scale, Cognitive Information Processing questionnaire and Self Image Evaluation questionnaire.

3. Data Analysis and Interpretations

Considering the evolution of the children in the process of the individual counselling, we have found an improvement of their behaviour on cognitive, affective, motivational and relational level. During our individual meetings, children have learned to self analyse and self evaluate better, to have a realistic consciousness of their strengths and weaknesses, to understand their feelings and emotions (and not to be dominated by them), to identify devalued thoughts which deformed reality perception and determine them to fail.

The exercises have been focused to learn the children to express with openness and adequate their feelings and thoughts especially concerning unpleasant experiences; to not be manipulated and aggressed by the others, to act in conformity with personal ideas and opinions, to valorise the qualities and diminish their defects, to be authentic in relations with self and the others.

Also, children have learned to accept themselves as they are, to respect their right to be imperfect, to trust themselves, to act so that feel useful and reconciled with itself.

Considering group counselling, the homogeneity of the group (determined by subjects' age, similarity of their problems or their adaptation difficulties) represented a significant positive aspect for "psychological cure" of children. Exposing their feelings, opinions, fears of every group member was facilitated by "similar lived experiences" (different abuse forms).

The group have been for abused children a family pattern in which the counsellor represented a substitute for their parents and, so, he succeeded to significantly influence group members.

Group counselling process has focused on developing social (interactional) abilities with the others. Children have learned to trust each other, to easily communicate, to accept and offer affection, to have an emphatic attitude, warm and open, to actively listen, to respect the other and his opinions etc.

Now, children are more opened, more spontaneous and manifests a higher level of independency, are more flexible, have learned to use direct ways to communicate, listen more the others, respect and treasure human differences / variety; some of them have became closer, accept themselves and the others, are capable to receive critiques and feed-back, ask for advice and support when they need, are more tolerant to frustration. And all these behaviours demonstrate the increasing of their self esteem level.

Regarding the impact of an individualised and group counselling program developed with abused children, we have found that:

3.1. *Their global self esteem has been improved.*

Using again *Self Esteem Scale* we have noticed that global self esteem for counselled children have been improved. If, initially only 20% of children manifested a medium and low levels of self esteem, after the counselling sessions (where children discovered and explored more their possibilities) their global self esteem have significantly improved; 64% of counselled children have more confidence in themselves and started to look more optimistic to their future.

Another significant result of our research which emphasises the difference between the initial and final results is connected to the emotional self. After the counselling sessions, children learned to identify, understand and express their emotions, so that now 71% of them manifest a high self control on their feelings.

Social self have considerably improved as a consequence of group therapy, fact that encourage physical and psychological interaction between group members. Children have learned to better relate with the others, trust, respect and accept themselves as they are. Reciprocity principle has been encouraged since the beginning so that to the final of the meetings children succeeded to manifest a high level of empathy. 83% of investigated children are more secure in relation with the others and declare that is easier to integrate and do not have isolation feelings when they belong to a group.

Regarding *physical self*, if initially only 12% of them declare that are satisfied about the way they are looking, the rest of them considering that they are too fat or too thin etc., after the counselling sessions, they have learned to relax, not to neglect their body, to take care of it, to accept as they are and to feel good with themselves. So, now 56% of they consider that they have a better impression about their physic, and they are conscious that people are significantly different, that “the beauty is in watcher’s eyes” and important is the confidence that you show and not necessarily the way you look.

The first evaluation of *prospective self* children has obtained pretty alarming results: investigated children had a preponderant negative, pessimistic vision on their future. After the counselling sessions, prospective self have increased from 30% to 85%. The changes have been realised: learning to found alternative for devaluing thoughts, children have succeeded to eliminate some of cognitive distortions (catastrophes, globalisation, maximisation / minimisation etc.) which only represented an obstacle for their actions.

3.2. *Self, others, future and world perception has improved.*

First results obtained from applying *Cognitive Information Processing Questionnaire* showed that 79% of investigated children have devaluing thoughts which negatively their reactions and behaviours, while final results demonstrated that in counselling process children have developed their abilities to avoid internalising every negative thought as belonging to their structure. They have also learned to ask questions to test the validity of their thoughts, so that 89% of them have now an improved perception about them, the others, future and world.

3.3. *Discordance between actual self and ideal self has been diminished.*

Data obtained from *Self Image Evaluation Questionnaire* indicated a significantly statistic difference between initial actual and prospective self) and final results (which indicate a diminished discrepancy). If initially 69% of investigated children had difficulties to self-analyse correctly, after the counselling process only 13% of them presented this self-perception problem.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The investigation of abused children from Emergency Reception Centre about self esteem level and cognitive processing of information demonstrated the necessity of implementing an individualised and group counselling program for this category of in need children.

Individual counselling program have focused on stimulating introspection, self-knowledge, self acceptance, increasing self esteem level and solving personal problems in order to obtain a better adaptation to their own person and to the lived situation.

The purpose of group counselling has emphasised on developing their abilities of interaction with others and adaptation to scholar and social environment.

During individual and group counselling we have confronted difficulties in developing a trustful relationship counsellor – abused child (because of their feelings of anxiety, distrust in adults' help), in establishing regulations / limits about counselling sessions, in controlling their aggressiveness, in manifesting a self-destructive behaviour (they easily pass from anger to refusal of communication and cry, and threatening with suicidal tentative), in adopting defensive mechanisms toward abusive parents.

We agree that although individual counselling have facilitated a change of the abused child, group counselling have conducted to his cure (Rugel, Barry, 1990, apud Mitrofan, 1999, p.111).

In conclusion, the implementation of the individual and group counselling program have developed self image of abused children and their chances to scholar and social integration.

In order to improve Emergency centres' activities and abused children chances to integrate, our proposal is that social policy makers to impose as necessarily counselling services in all social care centres.

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